

## I Am by infinisei

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**Summary:**

Time passed, but they would never forget her. Not that she would let them.

Five years later.

# I Am

## Author's Note:

What the hell is this???? I'm supposed to be working on the Wintershock fic that I promised you ages ago, but I was re-watching Stranger Things with a friend and this one little clip couldn't get out of my head. So I started writing....and this happened. This was written really quickly and was unbeta'ed so apologize for any errors.

I'm a problem, I'm the killer, I'm the cure, I guess  
I'm the end, I'm the beginning, the apocalypse  
I am something from nothing, I heard 'em say  
Rags to the riches, your best mistake  
I'm the future, I'm the relic, I'm the "not done yet"

- "I Am," James Arthur

It had been five years. Five long years of moving along with their lives all the same. But Mike knew that deep down they had never forgotten, that the memory of that terror and worry and grief had never left them. It had especially been true for Nancy, who had lost her best friend forever.

Out of all of them, though, Mike knew that he was the one that was most affected by her disappearance. There had been too many promises they had made together before she has disappeared in a cloud of ash and dust. And despite the years and the growth spurt and girls shyly eyeing him in the halls, those daydreams spoken out loud had stayed with him. All he could see were quiet, intense eyes who knew him with one look.

Which is why today seemed so surreal.

They were all there. The adults, Hopper and Mrs. Byers, and the teenagers-turned-adults, Nancy and Jonathan. And, of course, the core boys were there, the ones that started it all—Lucas, Dustin, Mike, and Will. They had all flocked to the Byers house when the call sounded, despite Nancy and Jonathan being away at college. This has been too important.

“Where is she?” Nancy asked with a hint of disbelief. She had been the last to arrive.

“In the bathroom. Cleaning up,” Lucas answered. They all sat there in silence. “It’s not just me who’s seriously doubting whether this is real or not, right?”

Hopper snorts. “Kid, I’ve been asking that question for most of my life.”

Then El appeared, and everyone went silent again, still not recovered from the shock that she was there. Even though they had reunited only a half hour earlier, the sight of her was still a punch to the gut for Mike. She still had that sickly-thin frame, but she had grown to be taller than Will, the shortest of them all even during puberty, and had the slightest hint of curves that had Mike look away with a blush. Her hair had also grown in the five years with no care, and brunette strands, only recently cleaned and matted with knots, still fell to the middle of her back. Despite the hardship and trauma of surviving in the Upside Down for five years, she had...grown into a woman.

Ever the caring mother, Mrs. Byers' mothering instinct had her stepping forward. "Here, sweetie, let me help with those tangles." A brush in her hand, she stepped behind El. After a brief, cautious jerk of her head that had Mrs. Byers hesitate for a moment, El allowed it. Will and Jonathan's mother took special care not to pull her hair. "Jonathan, could you put some food together for El?"

At that moment, there was a knock at the front door. "Jonathan?" It was Jonathan's roommate, who Jonathan had been forced to bring along since Jonathan had needed a ride home. Jonathan had tried to leave him downtown for the next few hours, but apparently he had gotten bored.

El tensed, a mode similar to that of a cornered animal overtaking her, and suddenly a knife flew from the wood block straight into her waiting hand, the edge of the blade in line with her forearm. It was a defensive move that was unfamiliar to Mike, and he knew they were all thinking the same thing: *Where had she learned to hold a knife like that and look like she could use it?*

That, and they'd better get rid of the roommate before El got more panicky.

"I'll get rid of him," Jonathan said hastily, moving towards the door.

"It's okay," Hopper said soothingly, his hand hesitatingly reaching out toward the knife. "He'll be gone soon. You're safe here."

After a tense moment, El relaxed her hold, and her arm fell limply at her side. “Eggos?” She asked hopefully. Her stomach rumbled.

“Of course, sweetie. Could one of you boys—”

“I can do it,” Mike said quickly. He rushed to put two Eggos in the toaster before analyzing what food was in the fridge. She'd probably want more food than Eggos. She *deserved* more food than just Eggos, and Mike knew enough about cooking to be able to pull something together. He pulled out the egg carton and a bunch of other ingredients to make an omelette.

A short conversation could be heard before Jonathan herded him back into the car. Then, there was sound of rubber on dirt as the roommate drove away. Soon afterwards, Jonathan came back and joined to help out, taking over omelette-making duty.

“So how'd you survive in the Upside Down?” Dustin, ever the loud mouth, blurted.

“Dustin,” Nancy said disapprovingly. Lucas slapped his friend on the head.

“What?” he asked defensively. “I'm curious! It's supposed to be toxic there, yet she survived for *five years* . Also, where did you sleep? Did you kill the Demogorgon or banish it to the Upside Down? *Did you have to deal with the Demogorgon trying to eat you for five years?* ”

Then things got weird.

In his haste to bring food to El as quickly as possible, Mike took the Eggos from the toaster, dropped them on the plate, then walked quickly to give the food to El as soon as possible. Jonathan, not realizing Mike was behind him, moved with the pan still sizzling with the eggs and turned to plate it, the hot saucepan moving right into Mike's path.

"Jonathan, watch out!" Nancy cried out.

Mike, recognizing the danger too late, had no time to stop or change course. He ran straight into Jonathan's arm and, his foot moving between Jonathan's, tripped them both.

It was easy to see what would happen next. Mike would fall forwards, the plate of Eggos flying out of his hands, while Jonathan would be knocked sideways and hit the counter because of a loss of balance and Mike's momentum. The food would join them in the mess. Best case, they would end up on the floor bruised. Worst case, the pan would somehow get under or over Mike in the fall, burning him.

At least, that was how it was supposed to go,

Body tilted forty-five degrees from the floor, Mike braced for impact, ready for a mess of bruises and food and embarrassment, when he just *stopped* .

Bewildered, Mike looked up from the floor to find that he and Jonathan had been stopped mid-fall. Not just that, but the waffles, eggs and pan just under Mike had frozen, as if someone had taken a photo and the universe had forgotten to press play.

Before he could process what had happened, everything was moving again, but not in the way it was supposed to. The plate was tilted upright and the waffles were placed on top of it, as were the eggs from the pan. The pan was then placed back onto the stove, unharmed, as a force set Mike and Jonathan back to standing and the plate filled with unruined food beelined straight into waiting outstretched hands.

El, who took a brief moment to check to make sure he and Jonathan were unharmed, then set to work on the food enthusiastically, chewing vigorously on the waffle with bare hands.

The brush in Mrs. Byers' hand had stilled in El's hair. Nancy had obviously spilled some of her coffee on the floor. The men not involved in the not-accident stared with their mouths wide open. And Mike...Mike just stared at her.

"Holy shit," Dustin muttered in astonishment.

El finally noticed their amazement. Fear flickered on her face, and paused chewing, shrinking into herself. "Okay?" she whispered hesitatingly.

"You're not bleeding," Mike said dumbly.

Confusion flickered on her face. “Your nose,” he stammered. “I-it used to bleed before when you overexerted yourself. From using your powers like that.” Even when El’s powers were as great as flipping a van, her nose had still trickled blood when slamming a door shut.

Her eyes flickered. “Practice,” she said shortly. “Not there yet.”

“What are you talking about?”

She didn’t answer, her focus back on the food.

Unsure of where to go from there, Hopper cleared his throat. “She’s going to need a place to stay.”

“She can stay at my house,” Mike blurted.

“No,” Mrs. Bryce said. “She’ll stay here.”

“But—”

Mrs. Bryce cut him off with a look. “You’re not thirteen anymore, Mike. Plus, how are you planning on explaining this to your mom?”



Mike opened his mouth to answer...and nothing came out. There was no way he would convince his mom to have a stranger who was a girl his own age stay with them.

“You can take Jonathan’s old room,” Will offered. “He’s gone off to school during the year.”

Nancy piped up. “I have some old clothes you can borrow. You’re pretty close to my size.”

Hopper grasped the back of his neck. “I can try to pull some strings to get some identification for you. It won’t be anything too concrete, but it’ll smooth things over a little.”

Mike moved to her side. “It may not be exactly how I wanted it to go,” he said quietly. “But this might be even better.”

She turned her attention towards him, her laser focus warming him as much as it put butterflies in his stomach. It caused words to flow out a little faster. “Mrs. Byers and the Chief can get you everything you need. They’ll be able to help you a lot since they know personally about what happened. And, well, you know... you’ll still be able to visit my house.” Realizing what that sounded like, he tried to backtrack. “Or, I can come over too. After school. If you want me to.” He tried to ignore his friends’ snickering behind him.

“Just stop now before you dig yourself in a deeper hole,” Dustin said with a snicker.

“Shut up,” Mike hissed back.

El, though, El was smiling softly, her eyes happy and warm at the image he was painting. “Every day?”

And Mike, helpless to that look even after five years, smiled back. “Yeah. Definitely. Whenever you want,” he promised.

“You don’t have to be afraid anymore, kid,” Hopper said. “It’s over.”

But instead of reassuring her as the sheriff meant to, El’s smile faded, her eyes turning haunted. “Not yet.”